

Women play the composer role in opera

NEW YORK — One of the great paradoxes of the art world lies in the gender segregation of opera. The art form that so often defies

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Women has almost completely shut them out of

its creation.

Women haven't complained too loudly over the centuries; singing opera makes for a more dependable living than writing it. Nonetheless, women are beginning to claim their role in opera-making, even as more companies revive isolated lyric theater works made by women in years past.

The result is a fascinating convergence this summer: The Lincoln Center Festival (through July 26) is presenting *Patience and Sarah*, a notably '90s opera about a lesbian pioneer couple by composer Paula Kimper and librettist Wende Persens, alongside two productions — one traditional, one avant-garde — of *Ordo Virtutum*, an 850-year-old liturgical drama by the 12th-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen.

Meanwhile the influential Glimmerglass Opera is opening a new production (July 18-Aug. 23) of the rarely heard



By Christine A. Butler

'Patience': Lori Ann Phillips, left, and Elaine Valby portray a lesbian couple.

Mother of Us All, a meditation on Susan B. Anthony by composer Virgil Thomson and novelist Gertrude Stein.

Not one of these works mimics words — and if you'd be hard pressed to identify a feminist chord progression linking them, the story and character choices in all three express belief in sisterhood and ambivalence toward men. Stein, not surprisingly, has her Susan B. Anthony sing, "Men are so conservative, so selfish . . . so glibble." Hildegard isn't quite as blunt, but she's

direct: For all its elevated tone, *Ordo Virtutum* is a highly abstract allegory about a soul seduced from virtue by the one male character — the devil. In Lincoln Center's first *Ordo* production, staged by the scholarly Cologne-based early-music group Sequentia, the work's melodies emerged with subtle but definite characterization and a rapacious lyricism, and (the music sustained itself surprisingly well over an intermissionless 90 minutes. One key was the singers: They must be excellent, and Sequentia's lineup exuded personality, passion and taste.

Franz-Josef Heumannskamper's extremely static production found white-robed women (representing the virtues) fanned out before the audience while the devil and the lost soul moved up and down an aisle. We can expect something far faster, looser and more high-tech in the festivals second *Ordo* staging, by the radically feminist performance artists the Hildegards, opening July 22.

Even next to the traditional Hildegard, *Patience and Sarah* seemed surprisingly retro in style. The story, taken from the novel by Isabel Miller, is about two Connecticut women hoping to pursue a for-

bidden love in the isolation of the unsettled wilderness circa 1816.

It's the first opera to center on a lesbian couple, and as is often the case with such breakthroughs, it seems more intent on delivering a message than telling a story with the kind of extravagance opera is capable of. Kimper's music recalls Gian Carlo Menotti in its conservatism and Richard Strauss in its soaring vocal lines; it conveys the needed sense of rapture in soliloquies but fails to carry the story's more mundane elements.

It did, however, connect mightily with its audience during the short Lincoln Center Festival run: When Patience and Sarah finally made it to the bedroom in Act 3 (after taking all sorts of grief from their often brutal, male-dominated society), patrons cheered.

It's good that the creators kept *Patience* small enough to be presented outside the usual cavernous American opera capitals: Whatever the piece's strengths and weaknesses, it offers its oft-marginalized gay constituency the thrill of belonging to the glorious tradition of opera, if for only a few hours. That's one way to build a genre: from the grassroots up.

